Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

World History Honors

**The Melian Dialogue**

# (Thucydides 5.84-116, Rex Warner tr.)

Directions: Read **and annotate well.** As you read, look for places in the text that discuss 1) the meaning of power, and 2) the source(s) of power.

*The Context: This is a bit from Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.E.), and is called the "Melian Dialogue." It is between the Athenians (rulers of an empire) and the Melians (a small island which is refusing to pay tribute to Athens). The conversation is about justice and power, with the Athenians giving a pretty ugly (I think) view of "might makes right." The Melians try to appeal to ideas of justice, but the Athenians disagree.*

The Athenians made an expedition against the island of Melos. They had thirty of their own ships; 1,200 hoplites, 300 archers, and twenty mounted archers, all from Athens; and about 1,500 hoplites from the allies and the islanders.

The Melians are a colony from Sparta. They had refused to join the Athenian empire like the other islanders, and at first had remained neutral without helping either side; but afterwards, when the Athenians had brought force to bear on them by laying waste their land, they had become open enemies of Athens.

Now the generals from Athens sent representatives to negotiate with the Melians, and the Athenians representatives speak in front of the governing body of the Melians. Below are excerpts:

*Athenians* : Then we on our side will use no fine phrases saying, for example, that we have a right to our empire because we defeated the Persians, or that we have come against you now because of the injuries you have done us — a great mass of words that nobody would believe. And we ask you on your side not to imagine that you will influence us by saying that you, though a colony of Sparta, have not joined Sparta in the war, or that you have never done us any harm. Instead we recommend that you should try to get what it is possible for you to get, taking into consideration what we both really do think; since you know as well as we do that, when these matters are discussed by practical people, the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.

*…* What we shall do now is to show you that it is for the good of our own empire that we are here and that it is for the preservation of your city that we shall say what we are going to say. We do not want any trouble in bringing you into our empire, and we want you to be spared for the good both of yourselves and of ourselves.

*Melians* : And how could it be just as good for us to be the slaves as for you to be the masters?

*Athenians* : You, by giving in, would save yourselves from disaster; we, by not destroying you, would be able to profit from you.

*Melians* : So you would not agree to our being neutral [neither friends now enemies]…?

*Athenians* : No, because it is not so much your hostility that injures us; it is rather the case that, if we were on friendly terms with you, our subjects would regard that as a sign of weakness in us, whereas your hatred is evidence of our power.

*Melians* : Is that your subjects’ idea of fair play — that no distinction should be made between people who are quite unconnected with you and people who are mostly your own colonists or else rebels whom you have conquered?

*Athenians* : So far as right and wrong are concerned they think that there is no difference between the two, that those who still preserve their independence do so because they are strong, and that if we fail to attack them it is because we are afraid. So that by conquering you we shall increase not only the size but the security of our empire. We rule the sea and you are islanders, and weaker islanders too than the others; it is therefore particularly important that you should not escape.*…*This is no fair fight, with honour on one side and shame on the other. It is rather a question of saving your lives and not resisting those who are far too strong for you…

*Melians* : It is difficult, and you may be sure that we know it, for us to oppose your power and fortune, unless the terms be equal. Nevertheless we trust that the gods will give us fortune as good as yours, because we are standing for what is right against what is wrong; and as for what we lack in power, we trust that it will be made up for by our alliance with the Spartans, who are bound, if for no other reason, then for honour’s sake, and because we are their kinsmen, to come to our help.

Our confidence, therefore, is not so entirely irrational as you think. **(source of power)**

*Athenians* : So far as the favour of the gods is concerned, we think we have as much right to that as you have. Our aims and our actions are perfectly consistent with the beliefs men hold about the gods and with the principles which govern their own conduct. Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can. This is not a law that we made ourselves, nor were we the first to act upon it when it was made. We found it already in existence, and we shall leave it to exist for ever among those who come after us. We are merely acting in accordance with it, and we know that you or anybody else with the same power as ours would be acting in precisely the same way. And therefore, so far as the gods are concerned, we see no good reason why we should fear to be at a disadvantage…

[The Melians then explain how they think Sparta will come to their aid. The Athenians disagree that Sparta will help, and explain why? ]

*Athenians* : You seem to forget that if one follows one’s self-interest one wants to be safe, whereas the path of justice and honour involves one in danger. And, where danger is concerned, the Spartans are not, as a rule, very venturesome.

*Melians* : But we think that they would even endanger themselves for our sake and count the risk more worth taking than in the case of others, because we are so close to the Peloponnese that they could operate more easily, and because they can depend on us more than on others, since we are of the same race and share the same feelings…

…The Athenians then withdrew from the discussion. The Melians, left to themselves, reached a conclusion which was much the same as they had indicated in their previous replies. Their answer was as follows:

*Melians*: ‘Our decision, Athenians, is just the same as it was at first. We are not prepared to give up in a short moment the liberty which our city has enjoyed from its foundation for 700 years. We put our trust in the fortune that the gods will send and which has saved us up to now, and in the help of men—that is, of the Spartans; and so we shall try to save ourselves. But we invite you to allow us to be friends of yours and enemies to neither side, to make a treaty which shall be agreeable to both you and us, and so to leave our country.’

The Melians made this reply, and the Athenians, just as they were breaking off the discussion, said:

*Athenians* : ‘Well, at any rate, judging from this decision of yours, you seem to us quite unique in your ability to consider the future as something more certain than what is before your eyes, and to see uncertainties as realities, simply because you would like them to be so. As you have staked most on and trusted most in Spartans, luck, and hopes, so in all these you will find yourselves most completely deluded.’

The Athenian representatives then went back to the army, and the Athenian generals, finding that the Melians would not submit, immediately commenced hostilities…

[Ultimately,] Siege operations were now carried on vigorously and, as there was also some treachery from inside, the Melians surrendered unconditionally to the Athenians, who put to death all the men of military age whom they took, and sold the women and children as slaves. Melos itself they took over for themselves, sending out later a colony of 500 men.

**The Melian Dialogue**

ANSWER these questions based on the reading. Use complete sentences.

1) What is the relationship between the Melians and Athenians?

2) According to the Athenians, what is the source of power? Use 2 pieces of textual evidence to support your answer.

3) According to the Melians, what is the source of power? Use 2 pieces of textual evidence to support your answer.

4) Based on this reading, what role do the gods have in deciding who has power?